

Open season

Skiers don't have a monopoly on active holidays to Austria, finds Laura French

It's 5.30am and I'm at the top of the Wiedersbergerhorn mountain in the Alpbach Valley, on the eastern side of the Austrian Tirol. But instead of gearing up to hurtle down a snow-covered slope, I'm sitting down, enjoying a moment of peace after an incredible hike, and watching the sun rear its fiery head over mountains shrouded in a carpet of bright green.

Welcome to the Austrian Tirol in summer, a quiet, peaceful collection of mountain resorts barely recognisable from their winter months. Here hiking, biking, swimming and

sightseeing take place under warm blue skies, with average temperatures ranging from 21C to 25C.

There are still plenty of people around – 52% of visitors to the Alpbach Valley come in summer, according to the local tourist board – but it doesn't feel like it, and there's a real sense of authentic Tirolean culture in the area at this time of year. Perhaps that's because there are fewer Brits in summer: just over 22,000 came to the valley for the season last year, compared with 44,000 in winter.

That's worth highlighting to clients looking for a quiet,

cultural break that involves getting out and experiencing the great outdoors on foot, and a key selling point for Thomson Lakes & Mountains, which offers a range of sporty breaks in the region. With 15,000 miles of marked hiking trails across the whole Tirol, alongside a temperate climate, working cable cars and tracks to suit every fitness level, it's certainly well equipped for all things outdoorsy.

WALK THIS WAY

Among the most famous hiking routes in the Tirol is the Eagle Trail, a 250-mile track that stretches from east to west. For

those not quite set on doing the whole thing though (why ever not?), suggest one of the 24 stages, which can each be done in a day.

The village of Alpbach makes a good base from which to explore a section of the trail, and with 560 miles of hiking paths found in the surrounding valley, it's an ideal destination for walkers in general. Lifts go up the nearby Wiedersbergerhorn mountain every day during summer, and once a month they start around 4.30am for the sunrise, hoisting up early risers who come to see the sky take on pink, blue and lilac hues →

TOP TIP

Find out more at alpbachtal.at, visittirol.co.uk and for Niederau Wildschoenau.

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It's a 45-minute, moderate hike from the station to the mountain top, but for a slightly more challenging hike suggest the ascent to Galtenberg, the highest peak in Alpbach (around six hours). There's a weekly guided walk there that departs from the Tourist Information Office, and it's free with the Alpbachtal Seenland Card. Anyone staying in the area will get one on arrival, and the pass gives access to cable cars, buses and local museums.



HOW TO SELL

Target the Austrian Tirol at active families and older couples with good fitness. The best time to visit is June to September; there are few tourists in May, so it's a good time for a quiet, relaxing break, but lifts don't start until June. In summer, easyJet flies direct four times a week from Gatwick to Innsbruck, and Ryanair flies to Salzburg, both about two hours. British Airways is bringing in a twice-weekly service from Heathrow to Innsbruck next summer.

There's a similar deal over in the Wildschönau Valley (around 40 minutes from Alpbach), with free guided walks every day during the week from Niederau. I can vouch for the moor walk – a charming uphill stroll through forests filled with purple orchids, wild herbs and tiny strawberries, which finishes with a barefoot wander through the muddy but glorious moorland. Odd as it sounds, it ended up being one of the most memorable experiences of my trip, with bottle-green pine trees, fresh shrubbery and distant silhouettes of mountains at every turn, and spongy moss squelching underfoot.

FREE WHEELING

But the Tirol isn't just a haven for hikers; smooth terrain and trails marked according to difficulty make the region ideal for cycling, and there are now more than 3,500 miles of bike routes.

Among them lies the longest continuous track in the Alps, the Bike Trail Tirol, a 600-plus-mile odyssey in 32 sections. If that's not enough to entice cycling

fanatics, there's the all-new 400-mile Tirol Mountain Bike Safari, which those staying in Alpbach can experience via a more manageable 20-mile stretch to Niederau.

Then again, if the thought of battling red-faced against steep mountain roads makes clients shiver as much as it does me, suggest an e-bike; visitors can hire them in Alpbach (from Conny's Sport for €22 per day or €12 for a half day, or from Romantikhof Böglerhof).

Or if they don't fancy going it alone, Aktivbiking offers a free cycling tour from Gasthof Hornboden to the hamlet of Inneralpbach, at 3pm every Tuesday in summer.

aktivbiking.com

With a motor behind me I felt like a Tour de France-esque pro – until I switched it off and was swiftly disappointed – and it certainly made things easier as we cycled up past hilly pastures so green they looked like they must have been Photoshopped. For real thrill-seekers though, suggest the Laubwerk bike



Thomson Lakes & Mountains offers 12 summer resorts in the Tirol, including the resort of Alpbach in the Alpbach Valley and Niederau in the Wildschönau Valley. A week at the four-star Hotel Alphof starts from £509 based on two sharing, including flights from Gatwick and resort transfers. thomsonlakes.co.uk



ABOVE: Alpbach town centre

SWITZERLAND & AUSTRIA ACTIVE IN AUSTRIA DESTINATIONS



The moor walk was a charming stroll in forests filled with orchids, wild herbs and tiny strawberries

trail, an 800-metre free-ride descent that drops 150 metres in elevation as it traverses the village's dramatic, verdant scenery. Or suggest one of several other adventure activities in the area. White-water rafting, kayaking and canyoning are all possible around Brandenburg with Sport Ossi, or for a more serene affair there's paragliding from €95. sport-ossi.funair.at

TASTING THE TIROL

It's not all about soaring heights and breathtaking landscapes though. Dairy farms open in summer, including Schönanger Alm in Wildschönau, where you can sample award-winning cheeses and learn how they are made. I came back armed with enough to last me through to the next century (tours are free with the sightseeing card or €3 otherwise). Nearby there's the Steinerhof farm, where Schnapps made from turnips has been produced since 1840, and tastes every bit as bizarre and overpowering as it sounds. schoenangeralm.at

For clients with a sweeter tooth, recommend wine tasting at the 500-year-old cellar in the Böglerhof hotel back in Alpbach. It's also home to an excellent restaurant serving fresh lake fish and traditional dishes in a historic,

wood-furnished room that dates back to the 14th century. boeglerhof.at/en

The Tirol isn't short on good food options more generally, with the likes of schnitzel, groestl and kaiserschmarrn (shredded, doughy pancake doused in apple sauce) appearing on just about every menu around. And with clear skies, warm sun and stunning views to accompany them, the food – like the region itself – is just as good in summer as it is in winter, if not better. [TW](http://tw)

Tried & Tested

HOTEL ALPHOF

Designed like a wooden farmhouse, the four-star Hotel Alphof takes you to the heart of the traditional Tirol with a cosy fireside bar, atmospheric restaurant and spacious rooms filled with unique Tirolean character. The terrace offers spectacular views over the surrounding mountains, and the spa and pool provide an ideal spot in which to relax at the end of an active day.



TOP: Hiking and cycling around Alpbach

RIGHT: Cheese-making on a dairy farm